ReviewDebate: Response to Mike O'Donnell

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A Response to Mike O'Donnell

DAVID GOODHART

I'm afraid to say that I found Mike O'Donnell's arguments unconvincing. Much of the article seems to be an assertion of his preferences rather than an argument employing logic and evidence. His preferences are for human rights and equality, which seem to magically sweep away all conflicts of interests and values between people. There are moments when O'Donnell seems to acknowledge the limits of liberal pieties: he accepts some of the criticism of political correctness and implies that it is not sensible for multiculturalists to ignore the interests of ethnic majorities. But a few paragraphs later he asserts that the symbols and institutions of the British majority are no longer adequate for generating solidarity. He then goes on to suggest that the curriculum be broadened to embrace the history of ethnic and religious minorities. He appears not to have heard of Black History Month (which takes place every October in Britain). The real world seldom impinges. The dramatic recent rise in public anxiety about the 'security and identity' issues, in the light of a big surge in immigration and the emergence of Islamic terrorism, is not mentioned, nor is the worrying evidence from Robert Puttnam and others about declining levels of trust in areas of high ethnic diversity. And towards the end he seems to acknowledge the utopian nature of his project when he writes that 'the effectiveness of human rights depends on the support of a democratic global consensus and commitment to action'.

O'Donnell does try his best to be fair to my own recent writing on liberal or progressive nationalism. But it is not sufficient to dismiss me with an assertion from Bhikhu Parekh, 'the language of nationalism is deeply flawed and best avoided' (Parekh in Goodhart, 2006: 76), or to claim that I show inadequate empathy towards minorities. He also misunderstands a throw away comment about two-tier citizenship in which I suggest that it may be of mutual benefit for some lower skilled workers from outside Europe (not inside as he says) to come to work temporarily in Britain and return home a few years later, without enjoying a right of permanent residence or the right to bring in families. I was making the point mainly to stress that there is no *right* to immigration (except for the small number of genuine asylum seekers) and that it should be permitted only when it is judged to be in the interests of the receiving country. (And, given the very uneven distribution of the costs and benefits of immigration, preferably when it can be shown to be in the interests of poorer British citizens.)

O'Donnell expresses the anti-nationalism so common among modern academics and intellectuals, and at times implies that nationalism must, almost by definition, be ethnically based (he accuses me of being an ethnicist, whatever that is). But this is nonsense, the whole point of what I am saying is that we need to try to create, bottom up as much as top down, a post-ethnic sense of national solidarity that is open to citizens who do not belong to the ethnic majority but, equally, does not set itself against the feelings, symbols and solidarities of that majority.

Nationalism has always been Janus-like. Alongside the hatred and conflict it has generated, it is also responsible for many of the most positive aspects of modern societies – the idea of equal citizenship, the readiness to share with, and make sacrifices for, stranger-citizens (of all classes and races). It was sentiments of national solidarity as much as class solidarity, a feeling that 'we are all in this together', that helped to build and sustain the welfare state. Feelings of national solidarity can be regarded as a more intense subset of the more general feeling of human solidarity – both are about identifying, and sharing, with strangers. In today's Europe (and, indeed, in multinational Britain), there is no reason why the two sentiments must conflict.

Liberal anti-nationalism seems to be based on the fallacy that because all humans are morally equal and worthy of equal respect, the nation state has no right to privilege its own citizens. But moral equality does not mean that we have equal feelings or obligations to all humanity. In economics and sociology, the Left happily embraces the idea of group interests and affinities. But when it comes to culture or national sentiment, the Left switches to a rhetoric of individualism, implicitly seeing society, or at least the dominant culture, as no more than a collection of individuals with no special ties towards each other. (Hence mass immigration is unproblematic because there is no significant community or pattern of life to be disrupted,

and any resistance to it must be racist.) This 'blank sheet' individualism often employs the language of internationalism and universal rights, as Mike O'Donnell does.

The Left has historically struggled for a 'universal' notion of equal national citizenship that is blind to wealth, gender and, more recently, race and ethnicity, and one that promotes a high degree of sharing and engagement with fellow citizens. Yet this idea of citizenship is not universal, it stops at our borders. For the legal, political and welfare contracts involved in modern citizenship to have any meaning, nation states require boundaries and a degree of stability and continuity. Citizenship, even in its post-ethnic form, must include and exclude.

And it is no good waving around the concept of human rights as if that solves all our problems; to work properly the idea of human rights *presupposes* the solidarity that O'Donnell imagines that it creates. Rights that we claim are also demands that we make on each other. They presuppose a political community, and that community is not all of humanity. Contrary to the human rights ideologists, people are not born with rights and, regrettably, many of the world's six billion people have few or none. Rights are a social construct, a product of history, of ideas, of struggles, and of institutions. Both O'Donnell and I have rights, not as human beings, but mainly because we are lucky enough to belong to the political and national community called the United Kingdom, with its infrastructure of laws and institutions. And most rights imply reciprocal demands to perform certain duties, such as abiding by the law of the land or, rather more onerously, paying more than one-third of your income to the state. Rights are not a free lunch – in a democracy, asserted rights can only be sustained if a critical mass of the population accepts the corresponding obligations.

Accepting those obligations, for example paying into a generous welfare state even if you may be a net loser, is one of the cornerstones of the good society. My fear is that if society changes too fast, if the underlying assumption that 'we are all in this together' is no longer accepted, then the rights asserted by some citizens will no longer connect to an obligation felt by others. Because citizenship is about what you put in as well as what you take out, it is also sensible for new citizens to be seen to be 'earning' their citizenship through probationary periods of various kinds. *The New East End* (Dench et al., 2006), approvingly quoted by O'Donnell, makes clear that existing citizens do not automatically extend their sense of solidarity to new citizens, not because they are racist (although some of them may be) but because the sense of reciprocity has not been established. A welfare system based on individual need may seem just, but when large numbers of outsiders are entering without a history of contribution it becomes problematic, at least for a transitional period. As the authors of *The New East End* state:

> For the local white residents the whole moral order had become inverted by the emphasis placed by the state on individual need. For if what one gets out of the state is determined by need, rather than by what one has put into it, then dignity has gone out of citizenship. Dependency is encouraged, the principle of reciprocity has gone (Dench et al., 2006)

However multiple and hybrid our identities, people still need to connect to the wider social and political entities of which they are a part. Yet the continuity and shared experience that creates real communities is undermined by many modern trends. As affluence, mobility and individualism weaken the collective identities of class, ethnicity and religion (at least for the British majority), feelings of national identity must be adapted to act as a vehicle for the communal commitments that the Left holds dear. Indeed, a progressive nationalism, comfortable with Britain's multiethnic and multiracial character and its place in the European Union, is part of the answer to the progressive dilemma, the tension between solidarity and diversity (discussed in my essay 'Too Diverse?', Goodhart, 2004). This does not mean ignoring or downplaying distributional and other conflicts of interest between groups within the national society, especially when inequality has been growing so sharply in recent decades. Nor does it require an uncritical attitude to the nation or its history and symbols. The Left has often, with justice, mocked excesses of national vanity and antipathy to foreigners, and should continue to do so. But equally, the Left's uneasiness with national feeling is itself, in part, an anachronistic hangover from the days of imperial Britain. Those days are gone; national feeling can now be put to better use.

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